Food Studies in the Curriculum: A Model for Interdisciplinary Pedagogy

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Abstract: This paper argues that food studies is a model for interdisciplinary education by encouraging cognitive synthesis among various disciplinary theories and methodologies. The emergence of food studies in both graduate and undergraduate learning is compared to the development of other interdisciplinary areas such as women’s studies, American studies, and labor studies. The role of food studies in academia is discussed and arguments are made for the advancement of food studies courses as a means for examining complex sociopolitical issues.

“No discipline lays solitary claim to the child, or gender, or culture, or language. The body, the mind, the evolution of the earth: all are cross-disciplinary topics.”

--- (Schneider, 1997)

The scholarly study of food and eating is generally understood to be interdisciplinary in nature by virtue of the fact that food studies scholars are found across a wide range of disciplines spanning the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. While this is indeed consistent with one of the established definitions of interdisciplinarity (Klein, 1990) there are other definitions which are used in the higher education literature, many of which are specifically related to interdisciplinary pedagogy, rather than interdisciplinary scholarship. It is worth taking pause to articulate what we mean when we say that food studies is pedagogically interdisciplinary and the value that has for the curriculum. Having a clearly articulated understanding of the pedagogical contribution of food studies helps to inform curricular
decisions, hiring processes, funding, and is useful in educating university administrators on the role of food studies in academia.

In the past two decades, a widely held belief has emerged in higher education that knowledge has become increasingly interdisciplinary, which has been paralleled with a reconfiguration of many universities, departments, and courses (Klein & Newell, 1997). In this article, I focus on food studies as an emerging component of innovative, interdisciplinary curricula, following in the historical footprints of women’s studies, American studies, and other established interdisciplinary areas. Toward that end, the aims of this piece are to 1) discuss interdisciplinary theory as it relates to food studies, 2) contextualize food studies in the academy, and 3) strengthen the case for food studies curricula by demonstrating how it enhances education.

I. Interdisciplinary Theory and Food Studies

While there are several widely used definitions of interdisciplinarity, a review of the scholarly literature suggests that it is often defined as either: 1) the integration of more than one discipline in order to encourage the cognitive synthesis of diverse theories and methodologies (Hursh et al., 1983); or 2) the use of multiple disciplines to more adequately examine a set of social problems or issues (Klein & Newell, 1997). Both definitions are appropriate to the newly emerging field of food studies, as will be described below.

Interdisciplinarity and Synthesis

As students advance through their education, we expect them not to only accumulate knowledge, but to build connections across classes, reconcile disparate theories, and evaluate methodologies. This level of integration, best understood as synthesis, is widely considered to be the cornerstone of interdisciplinarity. As Sill (2001) wrote, “It is the tension between
interacting, discrete disciplines that provides the impetus for synthesis.” In other words, as educators, we provide students with a variety of disciplinary lenses, and the contrasting, overlain pictures of the world seen through these lenses is what constructs the kaleidoscope of synthesized knowledge.

Synthesis is considered by educational and cognitive psychologists as one of the most sophisticated processes in learning and cognition. Educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues (1956) developed a taxonomy of educational objectives of the cognitive domain which classified intellectual abilities and skills via a hierarchy of complexity. At the bottom of this hierarchy are lower-order cognitive skills, such as the recall and recognition of facts, names, and definitions. By contrast, higher-order skills, such as synthesis and evaluation, are considered to be more complex, demanding, and sophisticated, and therefore sit at the top of this hierarchy of cognitive skill. Synthesis is defined as the “putting together of elements and parts as to form a whole….Generally this would involve a recombination of parts of previous experience with new material, reconstructed into a new and more or less well-integrated whole. This is the category in the cognitive domain which most clearly provides for creative behavior on the part of the learner.” (Bloom, 1956, p. 162). Synthesis is widely discussed in interdisciplinary theory because it is recognized as one of the major outcomes of an interdisciplinary or liberal education.

Prior to Benjamin Bloom’s work on educational objectives, developmental psychologist Jean Piaget presented a stage theory of cognitive development in which he identified the capacity to handle multiple perspectives as an indicator of higher order cognitive growth. This “cognitive decentering” (as quoted by Richards, 1996, p. 45) is the capacity to move beyond a single center of focus and to forge a coordinated, sophisticated way of perceiving reality. Like synthesis, this level of cognitive functioning is an expected outcome of a liberal education.
Courses in food studies nearly always include perspectives from multiple disciplines. Of the seventy-five syllabi collected by the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS, 2003) nearly all of the courses include scholarship from multiple disciplines. While indeed, this practice may be normative in areas such as urban studies or American Studies, it is, of course, more unusual in “traditional” disciplines, such as psychology or political science, particularly in universities which are organized along traditional departmental, i.e. disciplinary boundaries. Such interdisciplinarity encourages students to examine a single theme through the multiple lenses of theories and methodologies characteristic of a variety of disciplines. In other words, synthesis allows educators to overcome disciplinary limitations in theory and research methodology to better teach complex phenomena.

In all likelihood, this aforementioned diversity of material in food-related classes is partly a matter of necessity, as food studies is such a nascent area of study, many educators would be hard pressed to develop a course that stayed within strict disciplinary boundaries. For example, in psychology, unless one wished to build a course exclusively on disordered eating, one would practically exhaust the extant disciplinary material (particularly that which is suitable for undergraduates) in designing a class on the psychology of food.

**Interdisciplinarity and Social Issues**

This brings us to our second definition of interdisciplinarity, which is the use of multiple disciplines to more adequately examine a set of social problems or issues. Klein and Newell (1997) define interdisciplinary studies as “a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession.” The heart of interdisciplinarity is the interplay of perspectives that occurs in balancing depth, breadth, and synthesis. Depth insures the necessary disciplinary,
professional knowledge and information for the task at hand. Breadth insures a multidisciplinary variety of perspectives. Synthesis insures integrative process and construction of a holistic perspective that is greater than the simple sum of its parts (p. 406).

For example, if we wished to examine determinants of food preference we would likely begin by looking towards psychology, biology, and anthropology. Similarly, if we wished to examine the ethics of labor practices in global food production, we might draw on politics, economics, and history. Herein lies arguably the greatest strength of interdisciplinarity: the capacity to deal with complex sociopolitical phenomena.

II. Food Studies in the Academy

This brings us to the question, “How do we contextualize food studies in the academy?” The trend of disciplinary specialization, which dominated higher education for the first half of the 20th Century, has moved more toward hybrid, interdisciplinary programs. Such programs more adequately respond to increasingly complex sociopolitical problems and issues, as discussed. When Levine (1978) published the Handbook on Undergraduate Curriculum, he documented the growth of interdisciplinary studies, such as American studies, urban studies, women’s studies, and environmental studies. Since that time, interdisciplinary degree programs have seen explosive growth and are now a mainstay in higher education at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

What is perhaps most interesting about the growth in interdisciplinary courses and degree programs is that the way universities are organized reflects underlying epistemological assumptions about knowledge itself. The shift away from strict disciplinary pedagogy toward interdisciplinarity is indicative of a hermeneutic discourse among the disciplines, meaning that there is a circular and dynamic dialogue among historically different ways of knowing. This
shift has emerged over the past several decades in tandem with postmodernism. Broadly speaking, interdisciplinary teaching and learning reflects the postmodern idea that absolute foundations for attaining knowledge are inherently problematic (Mourad, 1997).

Mourad advocates a postmodern foundation for higher education, which includes the blurring of disciplinary boundaries. “Cross-disciplinary inquiries are an effort to pursue knowledge without being essentially constrained by the structure and content of a single discipline, including subject matter, predominate theories, typical methods, or primary schools of thought.” (p. 133)

Innovation begets anxiety. Academic innovation is no exception. Many new, interdisciplinary programs are tenuously rooted in the structure of the university. “Promoting interdisciplinary or integrative study in a university organized by academic departments, for instance, runs counter to the usual ways of thinking, behaving, planning, and budgeting” (Gaff, 1997). Many now well-established interdisciplinary programs such as women’s studies and African-American studies have won hard-fought battles to establish themselves as legitimate areas of inquiry. Now ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, gay and lesbian studies, are becoming accepted pedagogical areas because they engage with the plurality of cultures in society-- a value now well-entrenched in the academy. The Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University is an exemplar of innovative curricular and departmental design and surely heralds the promise for further development of interdisciplinary studies in food at the undergraduate and graduate level. Those of us involved in food studies understand that the teaching of food history and food practices are an important vehicle for understanding sociocultural characteristics such as race, gender, and class. This may not always be
immediately manifest to students or administrators who might think that food studies is exclusively, or predominantly, the study of cooking or hospitality.

III. Strengthening the Case for Food Studies Curricula

Food studies curricula parallel the development of interdisciplinary courses and programs which have emerged over the past several decades by promoting the examination of complex sociopolitical issues. The value of interdisciplinarity lies in the fact that it is “corrective” of the disciplines, meaning that it corrects for overly narrow analyses and forces us to broaden our vision as educators.

The study of food is a compelling topic with which to engage students, especially undergraduates, in the learning process. Moreover, the study of food can serve as a bridge between abstract “ivory tower” ideas and the concrete realities of every day life. As educators, we want our students to go home and say, “Guess what I learned today!”, but we know from our course evaluations that this may not always be the case. Teaching about food provides a unique hybrid between the abstract and the concrete, the hypothetical and the real -- it gives students something they can sink their teeth into.

Finally, the study of food, namely in the humanities and social sciences, is another way to examine important issues related to the plurality of cultures, both nationally and globally. The infusion of multiculturalism and diversity is a priority in higher education and plays a prominent role in any humanities or social sciences curriculum. Any gateway for students to engage with and be challenged by culturally different ways of thinking and being is laudatory and worth our pursuit as educators.
IV. Summary and Conclusions

Food studies curricula encourage the development of higher order thinking skills, use multiple lenses to examine complex social problems, and are consistent with the dynamic evolution of the structure of the academy. The interdisciplinary nature of food studies brings both breadth and depth to the curriculum by building on established disciplinary knowledge and enhancing it with a hermeneutic dialogue among the disciplines. Food studies is an avenue to teach students about race, class, gender on micro and macro levels. The outcome is a new, complex, multiply determined understanding of what we eat, where, why, and how.

If we reflect upon the development of established interdisciplinary areas of study we can see how each are a result of a specific zeitgeist. Peace studies emerged from our military involvement in Vietnam, labor studies from the civil rights movement, gay and lesbian studies from the AIDS epidemic, and so on. The current zeitgeist is that we are now facing a national obesity epidemic. Mad cow disease is a reality in the Europe and the U.S. Globalization has a profound and far-reaching impact on the food supply. Disordered eating is rampant on college and high school campuses. These are the very sorts of determinants that turn a promising but inchoate network of ideas into a timely, recognizable, and valued interdiscipline. Food studies is thus not only a model for interdisciplinary pedagogy, but a necessary academic response to the urgent sociopolitical forces by which we are enveloped.
References


